

We can do it

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Maximilian Steinbeis, Fr 24 Apr
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Five years have passed this summer since the last major European crisis, and as far as Germany's role in it is concerned, its historicisation is in full swing. On German television last week, a remarkable film was shown, a piece of docu-fiction dramatising the refugee summer of 2015. At its center is the story of the Chancellor Angela Merkel who, under immense pressure to which the machinations of ambitious men around her (Orbán, Seehofer, Söder, Gabriel...) greatly add, has to make a tremendously difficult decision: Should she shut the border to the victims of the Syrian civil war, women, men, children, at the risk of having to keep them away with blunt police violence? Or should she leave the borders open and offer hundreds of thousands of refugees protection? The first alternative would break us, was her conclusion – the latter, however, wouldn't. "*Wir schaffen das*" was what Angela Merkel said in that legendary press conference, a phrase likely to survive her. "*Wir schaffen das.*" We can do it.

What is surprising about the film is that it gives the events a radically different spin than the book it is allegedly based on. Robin Alexander's bestseller "*Die Getriebenen*" (the driven), published in 2018, told the story as if the decision that the border had to be shut had actually already been made by law and the wisdom of the security apparatus, and as if the chancellor had only refused to execute that decision out of fear of "ugly pictures". (To refute the legal thesis on which this spin depends, Stephan Detjen and I have written a book of our own). With this narrative Robin Alexander, today deputy editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper DIE WELT, helped to concoct that noxious mixture of "Merkel = weak" and "Merkel = dictator" on which AfD and Pegida are feeding until today.

Avoiding scenes such as those in Milan and Bergamo is the "simple and at the same time so demanding goal of the German government", the Chancellor said yesterday in the *Bundestag*. A collapsing health care system in which masses of people die miserably and unnecessarily – that would break us. Putting on masks, staying at home, keeping distance, getting squeezed crazy between home office and child care, watching your company collapse, dying unvisited and lonely in a retirement home? Yes, it's horrible. But we can do it. *Wir schaffen das*. Like 2015, the same people are demanding with a heroic gesture to sacrifice other peoples' life and limb to spare them any imposition of that sort. Unlike 2015, however, they don't seem to get much traction with that, because this time they cannot prop up their demand with a racist distinction between their own and others. After all, it is the old white men's lives we all are taking this upon ourselves for.

The rigid eye of optimization

The Protestant ethics of duty preached by the pastor's daughter in the Chancellery has certainly a grating effect on many. All the time we must *schaffen* something, work on our own perfection, be disciplined and hard on ourselves. How tempting, in contrast, the Rhenish-Catholic attitude of muddling through and postponing the reckoning to another day to keep life here and now pleasant. It builds a ceiling above our heads, shielding us fallible mortals from the rigid optimising heavenly eye and creating a room for us to *live* in instead of just preparing to die, prettily adorned with all sorts of baroque angels cavorting around, even and especially in the hour of greatest need. It's not just for the weather that the inhabitants of Protestant countries like to spend their holidays in Catholic countries more often than vice versa. (I'm saying this as a Protestant who grew up in the Bavarian Catholic diaspora).

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Beyond all denominational influences, the pandemic brings with it a danger of its own – that of an ascetic-authoritarian "tyranny of goals" (Alexander Somek), which demands the utmost of each individual for the sake of a goal which can only be approached and never achieved: that people don't die. Such a tyranny would be established by those who say: Nobody should die, and each of us owes to all of us whatever he or she can do to make this more likely. Everyone sits disciplined and rigid with fear, stared at by the cold, contact-tracking optimizing eye of the security state, isolated in their own flat and locked up each in her own little Zoom window, forever and ever.

But that, thank God, is not what the German federal government is saying. It says: This is something we can cope with, however difficult it will be. That is not. *Wir schaffen* this, as opposed to that. To avoid having to do that, we will do this, and how both relate to each other remains something to be discussed, contested and argued about and by which all rules and prohibitions must be measured.

As long as this is the case, I am not particularly worried that China and other authoritarian regimes are now claiming to have won the competition between the systems against the liberal democracies. We'll see about that. We can do it. *Wir schaffen das*.

Europe

The crisis of five years ago would not have happened if Germany and its Chancellor had not been so complacent for years, sitting comfortably in the middle of the EU without any external borders and leaving the problem of *schaffen* the asylum problem entirely to the Mediterranean countries. And the fact that the current crisis and the solidarity burdens it entails threaten to blow the entire European Union to pieces might also have been easier to manage if Germany had not for years blocked any attempt to create a structurally more crisis-resistant Eurozone. This is the other side of Angela Merkel's "*Wir schaffen das*" medal: she is by no means innocent of what needs to be *geschafft* now.

Thursday saw another video summit of **EU** leaders to clarify what European solidarity requires of member states that have been hit differently hard in the current crisis. CHRISTIAN CALLIESS proposes to differentiate between three stages: short-term money from the EU budget where it is needed to cushion the shock, medium-term conditional ESM aid, long-term and after the introduction of appropriate control powers for the EU – Corona Bonds.

The EU is hardly less threatened by member states whose governments are using the crisis as an opportunity to ultimately get rid of any risk of being democratically voted out of office one day: Poland and Hungary. It is not surprising that the **Hungarian** government is spreading the message that its emergency regime is nothing unusual and really just that, but that Vera Jourová, the responsible vice-president of the EU Commission, seems to believe these assertions is. GÁBOR HALMAI and KIM LANE SCHEPPELE list a few jaw-dropping insights into the Hungarian reality of these days.

The multipolar world order has been threatened as well even before the Corona crisis hit, but the pandemic works as an accelerant in this respect, too: US President Trump is lashing out at the **World Health Organization** to hit China. ARMIN VON BOGDANDY and PEDRO VILLAREAL examine the difficult balance the WHO must strike between its dependence on the Member States and its task of effectively managing the global fight against the disease, and call on Germany and Europe to step up their efforts to promote multilateralism in health policy.

This is just a small selection of what Verfassungsblog had to offer this week. As you may have noticed, I had experimented with a daily newsletter as an overview of our production for a few days, but it has turned out that many recipients prefer not to be bothered by us on a daily basis, and I totally get that. Sorry!

On another note, I recommend to your attention our crisis podcast Corona Constitutional, with FRANZ MAYER on the latest outrage by the **Polish** Constitutional Court, with DAVID DRIESEN on the dubious role of the **US** Supreme Court, with TAMAR HOSTOVSKY BRANDES on recent developments in **Israel** and with CORA CHAN on the crackdown of the Chinese central government in **Hong Kong**.

Finally, let me thank those who support us on Steady, which we value infinitely. Our Paypal address is paypal@verfassungsblog.de and our bank account is IBAN DE41 1001 0010 0923 7441 03, BIC PBNKDEFF, and if you think our work is worth a few Euros, we kindly ask you to open your purse. Many thanks and all the best!

Max Steinbeis



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All the best, *Max Steinbeis*

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